

Executive Summary

Introduction

Across the country people are rediscovering their cities, recognizing the importance and benefits of strong downtowns, and appreciating the inherent beauty and unique identity of the urban waterfront. In Wilmington, downtown is the economic and social heart of the city and the open spaces of the Cape Fear River corridor are the lungs. Both are essential to the City's health.

This Plan seeks to more fully connect downtown Wilmington and the Cape Fear River to achieve the vision of a waterfront downtown that is an inviting mixed-use destination, vital for living, working, learning, visiting, and playing. The intent is to create a lively sense of community that is based on the foundation provided by a special water body and strengthened by the urban flavor of an authentic downtown.

The development of this Plan built upon past planning efforts and was conducted with extensive public participation. The planning process included: (1) an identification of needs based on the concerns of local citizens and stakeholders, and an analysis of existing conditions; (2) the preparation of potential alternatives for consideration and prioritization; and (3) the development of broad, strategic directions and specific implementation recommendations. The Plan is a blueprint for the future and balances long-term and sustainable solutions with clear and immediate action.

Issues

Wilmington is at an important point in the continuing evolution of downtown as the focal point of the region. The analysis of the current physical, socio-economic, governmental, and programmatic conditions revealed several key issues for downtown Wilmington. These include:

- Negative Quality of Life Perceptions
- A Poor Orientation to the River
- An Incomplete Downtown Development Pattern
- Excessive Amounts of Surface Parking
- Not Enough Downtown Housing
- Missing Downtown Open Spaces
- A Lack of Public and Private Investment and Funding
- Regulatory Challenges
- Threats to the Quality of Urban Design
- Few Young Adults

Benchmarks

To measure implementation toward the vision, the Plan includes several growth benchmarks and goals. The benchmarks for 2020 include increasing the downtown population by 3,000 new residents, 1,500 new housing units, 10,000 new jobs, and 200% more hotel rooms. In addition, the goals include the utilization of 90% of downtown parcels and a building vacancy rate of less than 10%.

Recommendations

The Plan includes a comprehensive range of recommended actions to address the identified issues and meet the quantified benchmarks. Recommendations for implementing the Vision 2020 Plan are organized around three central objectives: celebrating the waterfront, completing the historic core, and continuing recent progress. Strategies, prioritized actions, and implementation steps have been developed to ensure immediate and tangible results that will help catalyze development and continue to strengthen downtown Wilmington.

Objective I: Celebrate the Waterfront and draw inspiration from its unique strengths.

1. Activate the water's edge with a series of waterfront parks and distinct open spaces, including an expanded Festival Park (Riverfront Park), an expanded Dram Tree Park, and a new city park at Holmes Bridge..
2. Connect people to the river by improving access along key routes, including Chestnut and Market Streets.
3. Promote waterfront attributes and events with targeted marketing efforts and increased activities and amenities to raise the profile of downtown.

Objective II: Complete the Historic Core with high-quality, mixed-use infill development.

4. Partner with stakeholders to achieve public benefits on development projects with mutual interests.
5. Invest public resources to improve the public realm, including returning Front Street to 2-way traffic and creating Thalian Square.
6. Develop key infill sites by demonstrating a collaborative approach and using incentives for redevelopment of underutilized parcels.

Objective III: Sustain the Momentum by continuing downtown's positive changes.

7. Address quality of life concerns by increasing downtown safety patrols, enforcing regulations, and enhancing the use of public space to improve the downtown experience.
8. Improve the regulatory environment to provide clear direction and strengthen the design review process.
9. Strengthen downtown organizations by coordinating activities, encouraging partnerships, and distinguishing roles and responsibilities.
10. Engage and expand the community by creating green connections with surrounding areas and coordinating redevelopment efforts.